

## WHEELDEN EXHIBITION COMMENTS

“Painted Desert,” a long awaited exhibition of paintings by one of the city’s most respected artists and teachers, Michael Wheelden, brings a new twist to a subject that Wheelden has been exploring for decades: the vernacular residential architecture common to the region’s older neighborhoods. Since his last solo exhibition in 2004, which was also organized by the Visual Arts Program of the San Diego Public Library, Wheelden’s interest in mid-Century modern architecture – particularly that found in the Southern California desert – has emerged front and center. The clean lines and pared-down aesthetic of these structures, combined with the severely tailored and impeccably maintained landscaping (austere arrangements of cacti, succulents, palms, rocks, gravel, and concrete) surrounding them, suggest a strangely artificial, yet enchanting, world of purity and solitude.

In keeping with this “less is more” perspective, Wheelden’s technical and visual approaches to his subject have evolved in a simpler direction. His formerly vibrant palette is still exciting, but now evokes an arid, tasteful tranquility, and, compared to his earlier paintings, the shaped canvases, three-dimensional elements, and compositions of his most recent works are similarly restrained. Of course, there’s more than meets the eye. Wheelden’s paintings of dwellings have never been solely about formal concerns, but are also intended as reflections of their inhabitants, the human condition, and man’s relationship to community and nature.

Mark-Elliott Lugo, Curator, San Diego Public Library  
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